

MEDIA RELEASE **COVID-19: PSA believes DCS has no plan to contain spread in prisons**

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), representing more than 13 000 employees of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), is convinced that the DCS has no viable plan to stop the spread of COVID-19 in correctional centres and protect officials at its regional and head office buildings.

A total of 464 new cases were reported between 9 and 14 July 2020 amongst DCS officials and offenders. The PSA believes this rapid increase can be ascribed to a lack of planning and poor leadership from senior DCS officials. The PSA is aware that in various provinces protocols are not implemented or are deviated from. The PSA's proposals on preventative measure have furthermore been ignored.

On 27 March 2020, at the start of the lockdown, the PSA proposed that all correctional centres should work on a reduced staff headcount. Such a measure will enhance capacity in the event of an outbreak and limit the exposure of the number of officials per shift. The DCS only agreed to this proposal in the first week of July and many correctional centres are still refusing to implement this. Had this measure been implemented immediately, the DCS would have experienced a much lower infection rate than the current reported 3 907 cases.

Another proposal by the PSA was for community corrections to move away from a manual process when monitoring parolees. Despite the PSA's correspondence to the Minister of Justice and Correctional Services and the National Commissioner, the practice continues. The PSA's proposal for transport to be provided for DCS officials working in correctional centres to curb the spread of the virus amongst officials and offenders, has also not been implemented.

The PSA is aware of instances where DCS officials who were in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case were called back for duty within five days only to be later confirmed positive themselves. The PSA also received reports of the DCS not reporting all identified cases. In addition, management is slow to react to identified cases and, in most cases, only closes the floor where the employee works without considering other areas visited by the employee. The PSA is also extremely concerned about the failure by the DCS to take proactive measures for the protection of officials suffering from certain medical conditions or comorbidity. Employees reported to the PSA that applications are denied without consideration or they are required to work during the lengthy consideration of the application. The PSA's proposal to the DCS to allow employees who can work remotely to do so was also ignored.

The PSA calls on the National Commissioner to urgently implement the proposed measures. perform their functions remotely. The National Commissioner further needs to ensure that protocols are applied consistently to curb the spread of the pandemic in correctional facilities and ease the burden on officials.

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